

31

Tilting her head back, Rebecca closed her eyes against the feel of the warm rays of the afternoon sun and the soft caresses of the slight breeze that ruffled her hair. Sighing, she opened her eyes to look up at the towering trees around her. There was something about being outside calmed her mind, but it did nothing to take away the ache in her heart.

“Are you alright now?”

Turning she saw that Damon stood a distance away. Smiling faintly, she nodded at his question. When she’d collapsed in his arms, crying and wounded, she couldn’t have been more grateful that Damon had been there for her. But deep down she knew she couldn’t hide behind Damon when it came to Eric. She had to face him.

When Damon had gently brushed her tears away from her face, he begged her to tell him what happened. She hadn’t. When she refused to tell him, Damon had looked helplessly at her, needing to help her in any way possible. He asked her what he could do to help her. But all she wanted was to be away from everyone for a moment to get her thoughts together and with a gentle nod of his head, Damon had given her that. They now stood a stone toss distance from the lodge. No one would bother her here.

Except Eric...she thought sourly.

She knew that soon or later she would have to talk to him. She found herself surprised that she actually wanted to talk to him. Even as painful as it was to replay in her mind; she wanted to know what had she truly seen back in his office.

With a slight sound of rustling clothes, Damon was at her back, watching and waiting. After a short silence between them, Damon finally spoke. “I can stay if you want me to.” he offered.

Shaking her head, Rebecca turned around to face him, her arms folding around herself. “No. I can face Eric on my own.”

“What did he do this time?” he asked, repeating his question from earlier once more.

“It's not important. I'll deal with it.” she replied firmly before glancing away from him.

Shrugging his shoulders helplessly, Damon stabbed a hand through his blonde hair with a heavy sigh. Dropping his hand, he reached into the front pocket of his jeans

with a grim look. “If you won’t tell me and you won’t let me stay to watch your back; take this at least.”

Glancing back at him, Rebecca saw that he held the keys he’d given her the night of the Gathering. Narrowing her eyes, she gave him a questioning look. “What are you doing?”

“Eric tossed these at me the night he brought you back to the lodge; the night of the Gathering. I’m giving them to you if you should need them. With everything that’s happened since the Gathering, Eric power over the members of this pack is strong but tilts on a razor’s edge of collapsing. Until you transition, you are vulnerable. I don’t want you to be trapped if you need to get to safety.” When she still looked at the keys like they were a spider that he was asking her to pet, he added. “Take them for my peace of mind at least. Please.”

Nodding, she accepted the keys into her open palm before shoving them into her pocket. When Damon nodded, pleased with her acceptance, he turned to leave her. Watching his retreating form, Rebecca felt her curiosity peak at Damon’s behavior. She’d never really paid attention to how protective he was of her. She knew it wasn’t because he wanted her in that way, but if not that; then why?

Calling out to him, she took a step after him. “Damon!”

When his steps halted, he turned to the side to look back at her with a perplexed look. “What is it?”

Coming to a stop in front of him, she hesitated to ask what was on her mind, but she felt she needed to know. “Why do you care so much about me?”

Appearing confused at her question, Damon reared back from her, his eyes narrowing slightly. “You’re my friend, I suppose.” His answer was slow coming, as though he was hesitant to lie to her. He was hiding something.

Rolling her eyes, she scoffed at his answer. “Do me a favor, Damon. Don’t lie from me. I am sick to death of people around here keeping things from me and then just expecting me to accept the truth when it finally comes out. Tell me. Why did you offer your protection to me when we first met? Why have you orchestrated everything to help me and protect me since then? Why is it that you are always there to shield me?”

A flash of pain flooded his eyes, before Damon looked away from her. Rubbing a large hand over his mouth, he sighed heavily. “Eric has been a friend for years to me

off and on. We have our differences and our fights. Coming from two different wolf packs will do that I suppose. Anyhow; the moment I knew that you were hiding our secret and knowing you were meant to be Eric's, I had to do what I could to keep you safe until he could. Eric deserves happiness, even if he's too stubborn to reach for it himself."

Rebecca shook her head at him. "I don't understand how you could know that I was Eric's true mate."

Damon chuckled. "It wasn't that hard to spot. Since meeting you; Eric lost all interest in other women. Plus the night we met, his wolf was so close to the surface that you could practically see it."

"So that's the reason for everything you've done?" she asked skeptically.

Like a light turning on, the look of sorrow was back in his eyes. What was it that pained him so much? Folding his arms over his chest, Damon regrettably shook his head at her. "No. It's not the only reason." He paused for a moment before continuing on as if his words pained him. "I lost my true mate years ago and you remind me of her." smiling though the pain darkening his eyes, he seemed to recall a member of her. "She was fierce like you and beautiful and she was my world."

Pain seized Rebecca's chest. Reaching up to cover the aching deep inside her at his obvious pain, her gaze softened sympathetically. "What was her name?"

He smiled softly. "Talía. She was a human like you."

"What happened to her?" deep down she feared she already knew the answer but she waited to hear it from his lips.

Drawing in a shaky breath, Damon turned from her, presenting her with his back. When she thought he'd simply storm off after she dredged up such painful memories, she was surprised when Damon began telling her. "Like Eric's pack, my own pack is very traditional when it comes to humans. My pack lives deep in the woods, far from civilization. I was twenty at the time and despite the laws of my pack, I journeyed into the city. When I saw her; my world stopped.

She was a student at the local college. To make a long story short; I snuck away from my pack's lands to meet with her. I kept my secret from her to protect her. But it wasn't just a couple of months later that my pack members became suspicious of my frequent absences. Someone discovered what I had been doing, they discovered Talía." A lone tear slid down his face. "A Gathering was called and I was brought

before the pack. For disobedience; I was beaten, nearly every bone in my body was broken. Then; I saw her and in that moment; I truly knew fear.”

Covering her mouth with fear, Rebecca whispered as she lowered her hand. “What did they do to her?”

“The same thing that would have happened to you if Eric hadn’t stepped in like he did the other night. Talia was so scared and she looked so betrayed. She probably thought I didn’t want to fight for her. I tried to, but my Alpha was so furious at my actions to risk the lives of my pack members for a single human that he denied my right to bear the Act of Revealment. My best friend at the time stepped forward and dragged Talia deep into the woods to kill her. He came back with the smell of her blood on him.” turning back to look at Rebecca he sighed. “Now you know why I’ve remained close to you. I know what it is like to have your true mate and then have her ripped from you, to see the fear in her eyes at seeing the brutality of our world. I wanted to spare you and Eric that if I could.”

“But I thought that once you meet your true mate; that’s it. I’ve seen you look at other women before. You don’t look like a man mourning his dead mate.”

“What you’ve seen is just me wishing for her. I’ve not touched a woman since that day nearly a decade ago. What you’ve seen is for show. It’s not something I want others to know about.”

“Why? Her death wasn’t your fault, Damon.”

His expression turned bitter. “I can see no other reason but me for her death. The only ones that know about Talia are you and my pack members. I carry a shame that wish I would forget sometimes and I’d like to keep it that way.” Pausing, he explained.

“When a shifter loses his true mate after they’ve bonded, the will to live for the surviving shifter is no longer there. But when Talia was killed, I wanted to die so badly, if nothing else to just join her in the next life, but my wolf wouldn’t let me and still won’t to this day. Others think I should have died that day, but I didn’t.”

“Don’t worry; you won’t be for long.” The sound of Eric’s voice cut through the air around them like a whip.

* ~ * ~ *

Turning around, Rebecca found Eric striding toward them with tense, angry strides, his fists clenched tightly at his sides. His burning gaze settled squarely on Damon who still stood close to her.

“If you want me to stay, I will.” Damon whispered low enough that only she heard.

Not looking at him, she shook her head, keeping her eyes on Eric as he quickly made his way toward them. “No. Please go.”

With a grim nod, Damon tore off his shirt and pants; quickly shifting to his wolf form. Grabbing his discarded clothing with his teeth, he looped off in the opposite direction before disappearing from sight.

With a heavy sigh, Rebecca met Eric just as he closed the distance between them. His dark gaze glared over her shoulder toward the direction Damon had run. With a low growl in the back of his throat he took a step back to turn his hard gaze on her.

“I warned you not to put an obstacle between us, Rebecca.” His lips pressed into a thin line in anger.

Crossing her arms over her chest, she pursed her lips, her expression turning just a stubborn and irate as his. “Leave Damon out of this, Eric. If anyone is putting obstacles between us; it’s you.”

“Me?” he asked confused. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I saw you, I saw you with Beth.” Pain filled her chest at the memory.

Eric’s anger quickly disappeared at her accusing tone. Moving closer to her, he gripped her arms, his eyes boring down into hers. “It’s not what it looked like, Rebecca.”

“So she’s not back?” She hated that she sounded so cynical, but what else was she suppose to think? Beth was real competition when it came to Eric. What if Eric wanted his pure blooded she-wolf bride back? The thought brought tears to her eyes.

With a hesitant look, Eric reluctantly nodded his head. “Yes. She is back. But not in the way you are thinking.”

“Then why didn’t you tell her that I was your mate? You told her I worked for you, Eric! Which by the way; is not only a lie, but hurtful. I thought this mating-thing meant more to you than that.”

“It does!” he exclaimed. “You are my mate. That’s all you need to know.” He stated with a shake of his head.

Crossing her arms over her chest, she sighed wearily. "You won't even answer the question? Are you ashamed of me? Because you mated a changeling?"

"Where did you hear that?" he asked, his expression going stark cold.

She shrugged her shoulders dismissively. "Does it matter? It must be an easy choice for you if your pure blood bride is back."

"She is not mine, Rebecca. You are. She wants to be a part of Emma and Travis's lives. She wanted my help to rejoin the pack."

Shaking her head, Rebecca swiped away an escaping tear that slid down her face. She was already losing him and he didn't even care. "I heard you, Eric. I heard what you said to her."

"What do you want me to say?" uncaringly he shoved his hands in his jean pockets. "What of it?" he bit out. "Beth is my past. I will always care about her, but changes nothing between me and you."

It would have hurt less if he'd slapped her.

"Eric I am not some toy for you to play with and toss aside later on. If I am your mate, why wouldn't you tell someone that? What is the point of me accepting this bond between us and accepting the changes in my life while you treat me like I'm some...some..." Her words trailed off in frustration as she furiously paced back and forth in front of him.

"Outsider?" he supplied coldly.

Jerking away from him as if he actually had slapped her, Rebecca's face washed with the pain from his verbal blow. "Eric?" his name fell from her lips out of shock. "Why would you say that?"

"You're human; or at least you were, Rebecca. Until you change you are an outsider in these matters. You couldn't possibly understand what I'm going through or Beth for that matter. Because I chose you, my pack is now ripped in two. As Alpha of this pack I have to do what I have to. It's time you accept that."

Rebecca felt as if he had ripped open her chest and torn out her heart. What that all she was to him? A human, an outsider, and someone beneath him? Within her mind, she felt something shift. A cold tidal wave wash over her, helping to compose what was left of her pride. Reaching deep inside her, she could almost touch the second

being that reached towards her pain, seeking to comfort her. She could feel her newly found wolf, pacing beneath her skin. She wasn't human anymore; Eric had seen to that. Not yet a werewolf either; then what was she?

"Your right, I don't understand. But what I do understand is that I am unbelievably stupid." walking around him, heading back toward the lodge with long angry strides. Within her closed fist, she could feel Damon's keys biting into her palm. For the first time since he'd forced them on her, she was thankful. Emerging from the tree line, they faced the side of the towering lodge structure. Pausing at the tree line, she attempted to ignore the quizzical stares that she was receiving as other shifters looked her way. Just like Eric, they would never accept her here.

"What do you mean?" his voice still restrained and cold.

"I love you, Eric. I am sorry that you had to choose between saving me and your pack—"

Eric's wolf leapt to his glowing eyes in denial. "You're being childish. That's not what I meant." He attempted to say over top of her words, but she ignored him.

"—But I refuse to stay somewhere if you only want to acknowledge me before strangers when it's convenient for you. You are still keeping things from me." Spinning around to face him, she looked at him with her heartbreaking every second. "You want me to trust you and to accept that you've changed what I am, but you won't do the same. You refuse to treat me like your equal and share things with me."

When she saw that he had no intention to say nothing further, Rebecca willed the tears in her eyes not to fall. Turning back toward the lodge, she made her way toward Damon's car. She had to get away from him. He didn't really want her, not when he had his perfect she-wolf back at his side. She wouldn't remain in the shadows because his pack wouldn't accept her and because he truly wouldn't either.

Before she got a foot toward the car, she was jerked to a stop when Eric's steel hand settled over her arm

His tone was as cold and unyielding as iron. "Your first change will happen in just a few days. Do you really want to risk hurting someone because you can't control your emotions?" his words were meant to scare her into staying, because he couldn't let her go. But those few words had an opposite effect.

Shoving his hand off her arm, she twisted around to face him, when she looked at him, she saw the ruthless man that she'd seen when she'd first met him. The man that

saved her life and made tender love to her down at the falls wasn't there anymore. Was this the true man that she'd bound herself to?

"Don't worry, Eric." she softly said with an emotionless voice. "I've had my experiences with dangerous animals; I'll make sure no one is hurt."

Before she could take another step, the door of the lodge flew open with the sound of innocent laughter. Eyes locking on the both of them, Emma and Travis ran to her side, each holding a large painted picture in their small color smeared hands.

"Becca look what we made!" Emma exclaimed, proudly holding up her painting of an amateur of her house with crudely drawn replicas of the four of them

"I did this one." Travis held out his that showed an image of a chocolate brown wolf with obscenely long eyelashes. "This is you." He added proudly.

Her heart warmed at the smiles on their faces. She wanted more than anything to stay; at least for them. But she had to remind herself that their real mother was there now. What need would they have for her? Bending down, she wrapped her arms around both of them. She memorized the feel of their small arms around her as they returned her hug. Know this could be the last time she held them. Not wanting to risk the tears that were threatening to fall, Rebecca abruptly stood and calmly turned away without a word. She rushed across the thick grassy yard to Damon's small car. Jerking the door open, she climbed in without putting on her safety belt, immediately starting the engine.

Driving down the long winding dirt driveway, her misty eyes flashed to the review mirror. Watching as Emma and Travis raced toward her with confused and hurt expressions. What was left of her breaking heart shattered with Emma fell to her knees crying out for her to not leave with tears falling down her small face. Confused, Travis fell beside his twin, his small arms wrapping around her as he watched Rebecca drive off. Behind them, stood Eric with a determined look focused on her. Forcing herself to look away from him, she finally allowed her tears to fall and the pain of losing the family she'd nearly called her own consume her.

* ~ * ~ *

At the sound of wailing, Sarah appeared in the open doorway to see Robert bending to pluck up his wailing daughter. With a look of concern she turned to look at Travis who stood bravely by his father's side, but sadness lingered in his young eyes.

Fearing she already knew what had happened, she took a step toward him, her arms out stretched to take Emma from him. With a grateful look, Eric relinquished his daughter to his mother. When Emma's sobs had settled a bit, she finally asked. "What happened?"

Appearing to carry a heavy weight on his shoulders, Eric replied in a low tone, "Rebecca left."

Shocked, Sarah shook her head. "What? No, that's not possible, you two are bound. She is your true mate. What happened?"

Flashing a knowing look at his son and daughter, he remained silent. Whatever he needed to say wasn't meant for their ears. Rubbing a gentle hand down Emma back, Sarah nodded. "Travis come with me and lets see if we can't cheer up your sister." With a small glaring look in his father's direction, Travis followed after his grandmother without a word of complaint.

When his pups and his mother disappeared toward the kitchen, Eric made his way to the conference room. he had to leave and go after her. There was so much he wanted to say to Rebecca, but he didn't know where to begin. She was right. He didn't fully trust her. The way his pack—the way he had come to regard humans; as if they were weak and inferior had caused him to treat his mate like she was less. She was never less! She was more than his next breath to him.

He couldn't get the image out of his head of her looking up at him, begging him to explain why she'd found him with his arms around another woman; and not just any woman; his ex-wife. Inwardly; his wolf howled at the memory of the tears that had swam in her eyes as she'd looked at him, shattered. The sight was pure agony. He never wanted her to cry, especially not because he'd caused it with his thoughtless actions. How was he going to fix this now?

You really screwed up this time... his wolf bit out. For the first time in his life, Eric found himself agreeing.

Walking through the open doorway of the conference room, he found Chris sitting at the new long, conference table. A pile of papers scattered out in front of him in a chaotic mess. See Eric as he entered, Chris leaned back in his chair with a questioning look.

"Eric?"

"Rebecca has left the grounds. I have to go after her."

“What?!” Exploding out of his chair, Chris made his way to his Alpha with a look of concern. “Was it Myra or someone else from the pack? If anyone has done anything to her I vow to rip them to shreds!” Chris promised venomously, his devotion to his new Alpha female evident.

“You would have to attack your Alpha then.” Eric imparted with a weary look. When Chris scowled at him in confusion, he took a step back, not replying. “I have hurt her and I must make it right. I need you to get in touch with Jason and get him back here. I need the both of you to watch over the pack until I return.”

“With all due respect Alpha; is now really the best time to be having a tiff with your mate? The full moon is in just two days.”

“I will handle it.” Eric reminded harshly before he took a calming breath and added softly, “I have to fix this.”

“Damn right you will.” An angry voice bit out from behind Eric.

Turning at the sound of the voice, Damon came charging into the room. To both their surprise, Damon charged straight for Eric. Before he could guess his intention, Damon gripped the front of Eric’s shirt and tossed him onto the long table with a snarl. Hitting the table on his back, the force of his body caused the table to break, sending Eric to the floor atop a pile of broken pieces.

When Chris would have attacked to defend his Alpha a scolding look from Eric had him holding his ground. With a shrug of his shoulders, Chris mumbled grudgingly, “I just moved that table in here...”

Moving toward Eric, Damon snarled as he pointed an accusing finger down at him. “You have no idea how hard she cried over you. I don’t know what you did or said to her, but you had better fix this, Eric!”

Leaping from the floor, sending chunks of wood flying with his abrupt movements, Eric grabbed Damon by his throat before delivering a blow to his stomach. When Damon’s knees crumbled beneath him at Eric’s quick attack, his arms wrapped around his middle as he choked for air.

Growling, Eric allowed his wolf free reign to attack Damon, but he held back, barely. “Who gave her keys to your car, Damon? You had no right to interfere! Now I have to hunt down my injured mate and talk her into returning before she transitions.”

Wheezing, Damon stumbled to his legs with a hard look. "If you don't fix this and you hurt her again, Alpha or not; I will make you sorry."

"Don't threaten me. I have had enough of you thinking you're her protector. She is mine!"

"Then let go of your stubbornness and your pride and be her mate! Rebecca is my friend and if I have to help her stay away from you, I will interfere again."

Tossing his hands up in the air with a look of disbelief, Eric shook his head. "I don't have time for this. I'm going after her." Turning to Chris, he said. "Find Jason and get him here." Moving to shove past Damon, the sound of Chris calling after him caused him to stop.

"I can't." Chris said with an unsure tone.

Turning at the waist, Eric looked back at Chris with quirked an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"That's just it. I can't. I don't know where Jason is."

Moving back toward his beta, Eric looked confused. "He's missing?"

Nodding, Chris replied. "He never checked in after the Gathering. I can't find him anywhere and he's not answering his phone. I believe something happened to him. It's not like Jason to just disappear."

"Find him." Eric commanded before turning to leave once more.

"We don't have the manpower to; at least not anymore. Many of our trackers and hunters have left the pack and Elder Peter has disappeared. If we are going to find him, we need you, Alpha."

Right then and there, Eric was prepared to damn his responsibilities as Alpha and go after his mate, but he knew deep down that he couldn't. Jason had been by his side when others refused to. He'd fought alongside him and even traveled to Darkwood Springs to assist Doyle's mate when asked. He couldn't abandon him now.

Where ever Rebecca was going she would be safe for the night and tomorrow. He could go after her and beg for her forgiveness after he'd found out what had happened to his friend. There was still some time before the full moon, but it was time that he

didn't have. With a groan of loathing, he turned toward Damon that watched the interaction between him and his beta with concern.

He couldn't believe he was about to do this.

"I need a favor." He practically spit the foul tasting words out of his mouth.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Damon smirked at him. "The great and powerful Eric Daniels is asking me a favor? I wish I had a camera to capture this moment." He said, looking up musingly.

"I am serious. I had Jason tracking the men that attacked my family and me at my home. If he has disappeared I need to know what he found. I ask that you watch Rebecca. If I do not come for her after tomorrow, I need you to bring her back here. Human transformations are unpredictable. The change could come over her before the moon even rises. I need someone to be there for her if I cannot. Can I trust you with this?" he asked with a hard glare. His wolf snarled at the thought of allowing this rival near his mate, especially since the binding thread had not bound their souls together. But if his beta was in trouble, he couldn't desert him to his fate without at least trying.

Damon's face softened with seriousness as he nodded firmly. "You can always trust me when it comes to Rebecca, Eric. I want only for her to be safe and happy."

Tilting his head in agreement, he turned back to Chris who looked at him with a shocked look. Ignoring his look, he moved straight into Alpha mode. "Gather half of any trackers and hunters we have left. Half will be coming with me to follow Jason's trail. The other half will remain here under your command until I return. I will not leave our pack unprotected if this is a trap."

Striding from the room, Eric moved toward the kitchen to tell his mother of the situation. He had no doubt she would protect her grandchildren with her life. Once this mess was cleaned up and Jason was safely back within the pack's borders, he would devote everything in him to earning Rebecca's forgiveness. He refused to lose his mate after finally finding her.